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INTEGRATING ELLUMINATE IN EFL READING INSTRUCTION

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Abstract: *Two groups of college students majoring in translation participated in the study. They were enrolled in an English reading course. The control group received face-to-face in-class reading practice; whereas the experimental group received synchronous online practice using Elluminate Live, a web-conferencing software associated with Blackboard LMS. Elluminate has virtual rooms or vSpaces where virtual classes and meetings can be held. Elluminate Live communication tools include integrated Voice over IP and teleconferencing, public and private chat, quizzing and polling, emoticons, a webcam tool, a whiteboard for uploading presentations for viewing by class, a recording feature, a graphing tool, breakout rooms for group work, and a timer. In the present study, Elluminate was used as supplement in in-class instruction to provide students with extra reading practice from home. The present study aims to describe the following: (i) steps followed in preparing for and conducting synchronous reading web-conferences between EFL students and instructors using Elluminate Live; (ii) technical requirements of synchronous reading web-conferences using Elluminate; (iii) technical difficulties of synchronous web-conferences using Elluminate; (iv) the effects of using Elluminate live reading practice sessions on students' achievement; (v) participants' views of the benefits and shortcomings of synchronous reading web-conferences using Elluminate; (v) recommendations for conducting effective synchronous reading web-conferences using Elluminate. Results of the posttest showed significant differences between the experimental and control groups in reading skill development, in favor of the Elluminate reading practice sessions. Students who participated in those reading practice sessions developed positive attitudes towards web-conferencing and reading practice as well.*

Keywords: *Web-conferencing, Elluminate, reading comprehension, EFL, synchronous, in-class.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Web-conferencing, formerly called videoconferencing, is not a new technology. It has been widely used in teaching and learning settings since the mid-1980s. It has been used to connect students with students, students with teachers, teachers with teachers and other professionals in a variety of subject areas including language teaching, in general, and the teaching of reading, in particular.

The effect of utilizing web-conferencing technologies on students' reading skill development has been investigated by several studies. In LI, Houge & Geier (2009) found that use of videoconferencing technology to deliver one-to-one literacy tutoring sessions to adolescent students with reading comprehension problems showed improved reading and spelling scores. Similarly, fourth-grade students in Philadelphia who received four 50-minute supplemental synchronous online tutoring sessions per week, delivered over Adobe Connect, demonstrated gains in oral reading fluency. Both students and tutors reported an awareness of increased reading skills and effectiveness of synchronous online instruction. Teachers and parents reported that students demonstrated increased reading skills after receiving the instruction as well (Vasquez & Slocum, 2012).

Another line of research compared synchronous and asynchronous online learning. For example, Tsuei (2011) compared students learning Chinese language arts online using the Electronic Peer-Assisted Learning for Kids (EPK) with students learning face-to-face in the classroom. Students in the online peer-assisted learning group outperformed the face-to-face group in reading skills in Chinese. Students learning online, especially passive ones, showed significant growth in self-concept. EPK proved to be an effective tool in enhancing elementary students' reading and promoting positive self-concepts. Online activities significantly influenced online peer interactions. In addition, Skylar (2009) found that asynchronous learning provides an

adaptable environment to students in which there is ample time for responding and for significant file transfer. Asynchronous learners' aptitude towards technology improved as well. However, synchronous learning includes immediate sharing of knowledge and direct access to the teacher. In a third study, Brandl (2012) investigated the effects of an optional and required (jigsaw) task on beginning learners of German's quantity and quality of language use under synchronous and asynchronous conditions. The optional task yielded significantly more learner output in the target language and c-unit counts. There was also a mixed effect, in favor of the synchronous mode. As for quality, students produced fewer errors when performing the required rather than the optional task.

Although, thousands of students and instructors around the world are using web-conferences in teaching L1 and L2 language skills, especially oral skills, the effect of integrating web-conferencing in teaching reading comprehension to L2 learners, was not investigated by prior research. In the present study, an attempt was made to integrate Elluminate Live, a web-conferencing software, from home to provide synchronous supplementary reading comprehension practice to EFL freshman students the College of Languages and Translation. It tried to answer the following questions: (1) Is there a significant difference in reading comprehension skill development between EFL freshman students who participated in the synchronous Elluminate reading practice sessions and those who practiced reading face-to-face in the classroom as measured by the post-test? (2) Does the frequency of participating in the synchronous Elluminate reading practice sessions correlate with the students' reading comprehension skills? (3) Do synchronous Elluminate reading comprehension practice sessions have any positive effects on students' attitudes towards reading English and web-conferencing?

Since web-conferencing in EFL instruction in some higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia is not widely used yet, due to lack of internet connectivity in some college classrooms, lack of trained instructors, lack of administrative support and acceptance by the students, the present study will start a new line of research in Saudi Arabia and explore new insights into their use.

II. PARTICIPANTS

Two groups of female freshman students (49 students) enrolled in their second reading course (4 hours) in English participated in the study. All of the students were translation major at the college of Languages and Translation (COLT), King Saud University (KSU), Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. They were concurrently taking listening (3 hours per week), speaking (3 hours), and writing (4 hours) courses, grammar (2 hours) and vocabulary building (2 hours) in EFL. The students were all Saudi and were native speakers of Arabic. Their median age was 19 years, and the range was 18-21 years.

The two groups were randomly assigned to an experimental group (25 students) and a control group (24 students). The control group was exposed to face-to-face reading practice sessions in the classroom, whereas the experimental group was exposed to the synchronous Elluminate reading practice sessions from home. Participants in the experimental group had no prior experience with Elluminate, nor any other web-conferencing software. Both groups were exposed to the same in-class instruction using the same reading textbook and used the same supplementary reading materials prepared by the author.

At the beginning of the semester, the experimental and control groups were pretested. They took the same reading pre-test. The mean, median, standard deviation, standard error and range of the pretest reading scores for both groups are shown in Table 1. Comparisons of the means scores of both groups using an independent T-test showed no significant differences between both groups in their reading comprehension skills before reading practice began ($T\text{-test} = 1.63$; $df = 47$; $p > 0.08$). Students in both groups exhibited similar weakness in identifying main ideas and supporting details, identifying the organizational structure of the text, inferring meanings of difficult words from context, and connecting pronouns with their antecedents.

Table 1: DISTRIBUTION OF PRE-TEST SCORES OF EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL GROUPS IN PERCENTAGES

Groups	N	Mean	Median	SD	SE	Range
Experimental group	25	30%	32%	5.12	1.89	21-45%
Control group	24	31%	33%	4.78	1.63	19-43%

III. IN-CLASS INSTRUCTION

Students in the experimental and control groups studied the same reading textbook (Kirm & Hartman, 2009) which was taught by the author for 12 weeks. All of the chapters in the textbook were covered in class. Each chapter consists of 4 parts: *Part I: Reading skills and strategies*: previewing vocabulary, getting meaning from context, identifying the main idea, understanding the reading structure, organizing information. *Part II: Before you read*: skimming for the topic and main idea, understanding pronoun reference, underlining the main ideas, matching paragraphs with given topics and summarizing. *Part III: Building vocabulary and study skills*: recognizing word meaning, searching the internet. *Part IV: Focus on testing*.

As for assessment, students in both groups were given two in-term tests that focused on the following skills: *Identifying the topic of several paragraphs in the text; locating specific details; figuring out the meaning of difficult words from context; finding the referents of pronouns; writing a summary of the text or; and filling out an outline*. Both tests were graded and returned to the students with comments on strengths and weaknesses.

IV. TREATMENT

In addition to in-class reading comprehension instruction, extra reading practice sessions were held in the classroom for the control group, and online from home using Elluminate web-conferences for the experimental group. Practice sessions were held once a week for each group using the same supplementary reading materials that the author prepared. The reading materials consisted of a collection of expository reading texts with reading comprehension activities such as summarizing, outlining, identifying the main ideas and supporting details, and inferring meaning of difficult words from context. Each face-to-face reading comprehension practice sessions in the classroom was 50 minutes long. No time limit was imposed on the web-conferencing reading comprehension sessions, which lasted between 90-120 minutes.

As for the experimental group, the reading practice sessions were held online from home using Elluminate Live, a web-conferencing software, associated with Blackboard LMS. Elluminate live has virtual rooms or vSpaces where virtual classes and meetings are held. It has several communication tools: Integrated Voice, public and private chat, quizzing and polling, emoticons, a webcam tool, a whiteboard for uploading presentations, application sharing and file transfer. It also has a recording feature that allows the instructor or moderator to record the class session or web-conferences for students or attendees to watch later, as well as a graphing tool, breakout rooms for group work, and a timer (See Appendix).

At first, experimental students were introduced to Elluminate and the technical requirements of synchronous web-conferences using Elluminate, i.e. downloading Java from www.java.com, and having a pair of headsets. The Elluminate components were described, icons and what they mean were explained, especially how to turn the mic on and off to talk and allow others to talk. Instructions on how to access Elluminate were also posted in the "Announcement" page of Blackboard. A message was sent to the students with instructions on logging into Elluminate as well. Each student had to try her headsets, download Java, go to lms.ksu.edu.sa, enter her username and password, go to the reading class, click tools, click Elluminate, click the class name, click launch session, save java on the desktop, run java, then the Elluminate main page will open.

Each synchronous Elluminate reading session was pre-scheduled and students were informed of the part of the supplementary reading material to be covered, i.e. the text to be read on their own and the type of activity they had to prepare such as summarizing orally or in writing, paraphrasing, and answering questions. The students had to prepare on their own.

The author went online before the start of each session to make sure everything was O.K. During each session, she turned her webcam on to enable the students to see her. However, the students did not use their webcams and just communicated through chat and audio tools. Each session started with greetings and informal chat. Then an assigned text was covered. The students took turns to read excerpts of the assigned text out loud, answer questions, summarize the text orally, and explain meaning of difficult words. They were given a chance to think, correct themselves or correct each other. Queries and comments were posted in the chat box. The Whiteboard was used for clarifying difficulties.

Control group students read the same texts and did the same types of activities, i.e. summarizing, outlining, and answering questions; but those activities were held face-to-face in the classroom.

While working on the supplementary reading practice material, whether face-to-face or online, the author monitored students' work and provided individual help. Throughout the Elluminate reading practice sessions, the author served as a facilitator. She provided technical support on using the different components of Elluminate, and responded to individual students' needs, comments and requests. The author sent public and private messages to encourage the students to participate in the web-conferences. Students in the control group were allowed to ask questions in the author's office hours.

V. PROCEDURES

Before instruction, the experimental and control groups were pre-tested. They took the same reading comprehension pretest that consisted of questions covering the reading comprehension skills to be studied in the reading course. At the end of the semester, both groups took the same post-test that covered all of the reading comprehension skills covered throughout the semester. The tests focused on the following reading skills: *Identifying the paragraph topic and topic sentence; identifying the supporting details, and locating specific information in the text; inferring the meaning of difficult words from context using semantic and syntactic clues available in the text; figuring out the part of speech of certain words in context; locating compounds and idioms; recognizing and producing word derivatives; summarizing; and making an outline.* Most of the questions were short answer and required production.

The reading comprehension pre- and post-tests were blindly graded by the author. The students wrote their ID numbers instead of their names. An answer key was used.

At the end of the course, experimental students answered an open-ended questionnaire, which consisted of the following questions: (1) What did you/did you not like about the synchronous Elluminate reading comprehension practice sessions? (2) Did your reading comprehension ability in English improve as a result of participating in the synchronous Elluminate reading practice sessions? In what ways? (3) Did it make any difference in developing your reading comprehension skills in English? (4) What problems or difficulties did you face in using synchronous Elluminate? How were those problems overcome? (5) If you did not join the synchronous Elluminate practice sessions, why? (6) Would you register again in a web-conferencing practice session in the future? Why?

VI. TEST VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

The post-test is believed to have content validity as it aimed at assessing the students' reading comprehension skill development. The skills tested were comparable to those covered in the textbook and practiced in the classroom and online. In addition, the test instructions were phrased clearly and the examinee's task were defined. Concurrent validity of the reading post-test was computed by correlating the students' posttest scores and their course grade. The validity coefficient was .71. Concurrent validity was also computed by correlating the students' posttest scores and their scores on the second in-term test. The validity coefficient for the reading test was .73. Since the author was the instructor of both groups and the scorer of the tests, estimates of inter-rater reliability were necessary. A 30% random sample of the pre- and post-test answer sheets was selected and double-scored by the author and a colleague with a Ph.D. degree following the same scoring procedures and using the same answer key. Inter-rater correlation for the post-test was .96. Furthermore, using the Kuder-Richardson formula 21', the students' posttest reliability coefficient was .74.

VII. DATA ANALYSIS

The effect of synchronous web-conferencing and face-to-face reading practice in the classroom on EFL freshman students' reading comprehension skills was based on quantitative analyses of the pre- and post-test scores. The pre- and post-test raw scores were converted into percentages. The mean, median, standard deviation, standard error and range were computed for the pre- and post-test scores of both groups. An independent sample T-test was run using the pre-test scores, to find out the difference in reading comprehension ability between the experimental and control groups prior to the Elluminate reading practice. A within group paired T-test was computed for each group using the pre- and post-test mean scores to find out whether each group had made any progress as a result of in-class or Elluminate reading practices. To find

out whether there is a relationship between the students' post-test scores and frequency of participating in the Elluminate reading practice, each student's post-test score was correlated with the number of Elluminate sessions (web-conferences) she attended. The effect of participating in the synchronous Elluminate reading practice sessions on students' attitudes was based on qualitative analyses of the students' responses to the post-treatment questionnaire.

VIII. RESULTS

8.1 Effect of Elluminate on Reading Skill Development

The typical student in the experimental group scored higher on the posttest than the typical student in the control group (medians = 83% and 76% respectively). Results of the paired T-test revealed a significant difference between the pre- and post-test mean scores of the experimental group at the .01 level, suggesting that reading comprehension ability significantly improved as a result of using the synchronous Elluminate supplementary reading practice ($T = 9.51$; $df = 24$). Similarly, a significant difference between the pre- and post-test mean scores of the control group was found at the .01 level, suggesting that reading comprehension ability significantly improved as a result of supplementary reading practice in the classroom ($T=8.28$; $df = 23$). Since these results do not show which group made higher gains as a result of the type of practice it received, an independent sample T-test was run using the post-test scores of both groups. Results revealed significant differences between both groups at the .01 level in favor of the experimental group ($T\text{-test} = 14.36$, $df = 47$). This means that the experimental group made higher gains in reading comprehension ability than the control group as a result of participating in the synchronous Elluminate reading practice.

TABLE 2: DISTRIBUTION OF POST-TEST SCORES OF THE EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL GROUPS IN PERCENTAGES

Groups	N	Mean	Median	SD	SE	Range
Experimental group	25	83.60%	83%	11.81	1.19	32-95%
Control group	24	77.80%	76%	10.23	1.37	33-94%

8.2 Correlation between Usage Frequency on Skill Development

The total number of Elluminate practice sessions attended by the experimental group was 193, with a total number of 284 hours of practice, mean and median were 9, and the minimum and maximum number of practice sessions attended was 0-12. The study found a significant positive correlation of .48 the .01 level between the post-test scores and number of Elluminate reading practice sessions attended. This suggests that a student's reading score correlated with the number of Elluminate reading practice sessions she attended, i.e., more frequent and less frequent attendance of the Elluminate reading practice sessions correlated with high and low reading ability levels as measured by the post-test. It can be concluded that attending the synchronous Elluminate reading practice sessions did contribute to the students' overall reading comprehension skill development.

TABLE 3: DISTRIBUTION OF ELLUMINATE PRACTICE SESSIONS ATTENDED BY THE EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

	Session Mean	Session Median	Session Range	Session Total	Total Hours
Experimental Group	9	9	0-12	193	223

8.3 Effect of the Elluminate Practice Sessions on Students' Attitudes

Students' responses to the post-treatment questionnaire revealed positive attitudes towards the synchronous reading practice using Elluminate. 87% of the students found them beneficial and fun, and considered it a new way of practicing reading. It helped them concentrate and understand the texts better than face-to-face practice held in the classroom. They were more relaxed, as the web-conferences were held

from home and they took their time in thinking over their answers. They indicated that the web-conferencing sessions were student-centered and self-paced, whereas in class, they are rushed due to time constraints, and having to rush to other classes or exams. Synchronous web-conferencing created a warm-climate between the students and instructor. They received more practice and instant feedback. Difficulties were instantly clarified. They felt sheltered in answering and making mistakes, as they could not see the instructor and each other. They could re-play the reading session recordings any time and as many times as they needed. In class, they concentrate less due to distractors from other classmates, cell phones, and noise from neighboring classrooms, and students in the hallways. Some students in the control group missed the extra reading practice session as they found it a burden to attend an extra class session per week, in addition to the required 4 hours.

Some of the shortcomings of synchronous Elluminate reading practice sessions are that 15% of the students did not participate at all, because they were apprehensive of the new technology and thought it was not possible to practice reading through webconferencing. Another 30% missed some sessions. Some signed in late. Inadequate attendance was due technical problems that prevented them from accessing Elluminate. Some made mistakes with their username and password and could not sign in. Sometimes, when a student could not log in, I did not know why and I had to call her to clarify the problem. In some cases, I could not solve the login problem. There was a red mark on some students' microphone and could not hear the instructor. At other times, I had to click the mic icon in front of a student's name to enable her or enable another student to talk. Live technical support was not available in the evening, when the web-conferencing sessions were held, to help solve the login problems.

As an instructor, it was difficult for me to recognize the student who was talking, as I could only see students' ID numbers not names on the screen. I had to ask students to give their names before answering. Students only interacted with the instructor, but not with their classmates, as they could only see each other's ID numbers on the screen, and hence could not recognize each other. They corrected each other upon request from the instructor. I had to manage several tools at the same time. Sometimes it more time to clarify a point online that takes a gesture to clarify in the classroom.

IX. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Significant differences were found between the experimental and control groups in the reading comprehension ability as measured by the post-test, suggesting that reading skill development in the experimental group improved as a result of attending the synchronous Elluminate reading practice sessions. This means that use of the synchronous Elluminate reading practice proved to be a powerful technique (strategy) for improving students' reading comprehension ability. Results of the present study also indicated that students who attended more Elluminate reading practice sessions made better improvement than those who attended fewer sessions.

These findings are consistent with findings of prior studies such as Houge & Geier (2009) and Vasquez & Slocum, (2012) that found web-conferencing to be an effective tool in developing students' reading skills in L1. Like Wang & Chen's study (2007) which was at the National Sun Yat-sen University in Taiwan in which synchronous learning management systems (SLMS) functions, such as online chat, a whiteboard, and a videoconferencing feature, provided students the chance to gain practical guidance in their language skills, the present study provided individualized reading instruction and synchronous online interactivity. In the present study, students' evaluations of their experience were generally positive, and they recommended that prior training in the use of such technology can ensure its more effective use in the future.

As an instructor, the author experienced challenges and technical difficulties in using Elluminate similar to those reported by teachers' new to web-conferencing in the Kear, Chetwynd, Williams & Donelan (2012), Cunningham, Fagersten & Holmsten (2010) and Wang & Chen's study (2007). Such challenges included technical difficulties experienced by the students, creating a social presence, managing cognitive load when dealing with multiple online tasks such as solving login problems, monitoring the chat box, figuring out student's names from ID numbers, and managing the whiteboard. The author also experienced improvisation problems in response to students' emerging technical problems, such as inability to hear the instructor, having a red mark on the mic, and pushing the mic on and off. The author needed to make technical checks, session preparation, and contact the technical support staff to solve the problems encountered before and after each web-conferencing session. In addition to students not understanding fellow students usually because of limited proficiency on one or both parts, combined with the technical

problems mentioned; and the teacher not understanding some students, because of their unintelligible pronunciation, low voice (Cunningham, Fagersten & Holmsten, 2010).

Moreover, the present study revealed positive effects of attending the synchronous Elluminate reading web-conferences on students' attitudes and motivation towards reading. This finding is also consistent with findings of other studies such as Skylar (2009) & Freiermuth & Huang (2012) who reported students' satisfaction and increased motivation as a result of using synchronous online learning.

For future synchronous Elluminate web-conferencing session to be more effective and to increase students' participation, the present study recommends that students receive hands-on practice with direct face-to-face guidance from the instructor to help them master the login procedures, and to acquaint them with the different icons and functions of Elluminate Live. Live online support staff need to be available in the evening to help solve emerging login problems. It would be more practical and time-saving to use a soft copy of the supplementary reading materials, to be able to display the text and activities on the whiteboard. Students need to be registered in Blackboard by name or name and student ID, to help recognize who is talking and responding. Finally Elluminate web-conferences should be supported by an online discussion board, a wiki or a blog for follow-up discussions of the reading sessions and activities.

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Appendix

A sample Elluminate Session Scheduling Page

The screenshot shows the Blackboard Learn interface for scheduling Elluminate Live! sessions. The main content area is titled 'Elluminate Live! Sessions' and includes a 'Create Elluminate Live! Session' button. Below this, there are tabs for 'Live Sessions' and 'Recorded Sessions'. A calendar for September 2013 is displayed, showing the current date as the 6th. The sidebar on the left contains a 'COURSE MANAGEMENT' section with a 'Control Panel' and a 'KSU DRIVE' section with various course tools like 'Announcements', 'Blogs', 'Contacts', etc.

A Sample Elluminate Session

The screenshot shows an active Elluminate Live! session. The window title is 'Elluminate Live! (GRAMMAR 5) 2011/01/12 10:55:46'. The interface includes a 'Participants' list with two users, a 'Chat' window showing a conversation, and a 'Video' window showing a participant. The main area is a 'Whiteboard - Main Room' with a text box containing 'Developed' and 'developing'. The interface also includes a toolbar with various tools and a status bar at the bottom indicating 'In session for 30 minutes.'

A Sample Student-instructor Chat

430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): Hello Ms
 Moderator: Good evening
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): good evening
 Moderator: How was ur weekend?
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): good and u
 Moderator: cold
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): yes
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): 236
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): and 239
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): ok
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): ok, thanks for the information
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): yes
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): thank you so much
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): 238
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): 238
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): 238
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): no
 Moderator: p. 241
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): yes
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): thank you so much
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): 238
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): 238
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): 238
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): no
 Moderator: p. 241
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): yes
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): ms how about the booklet
 430201473@student.ksu.edu.sa (430201473): ok